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# Seminar on the American Catholic Experience

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## SEMINAR ON THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE

In this, its third year of life, the continuing seminar on "The American Catholic Experience" continued its effort to reflect theologically on elements and events in the history of American Catholicism. Seminar members are persuaded that our theology has been shaped too strongly for too long by European experiences and perspectives. It is time to discern and articulate what our own history has to teach us. Then, perhaps, we can share the lessons of our history with other regions of the world church.

In the first session, we discussed "Charles E. Coughlin's Anti-Semitism," a paper by Mary Christine Athans, B.V.M. (School of Divinity of the College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN). Athans pointed out that political perspectives on the famous "radio priest" are plentiful. There is little exploration of the intellectual underpinnings of his thought. This is particularly true for the anti-Semitism (more properly, anti-Judaism) which became dominant in Coughlin's speeches and writings in 1938 and thereafter.

In reading all the issues of Coughlin's weekly newspaper, *Social Justice*, Athans discovered that next to the popes and Thomas Aquinas, the author most quoted was an Irish priest, Denis Fahey, C.S.Sp. Fahey's work provided theological "respectability" for Coughlin's distorted views.<sup>1</sup>

After Coughlin had tried and failed to prevent Roosevelt's re-election in 1936, he began to look for the enemies responsible for his defeat. "Jewish bankers" became the enemy he targeted. In Fahey's *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World*, Coughlin read that the Jewish bankers had brought about the Bolshevik Revolution in league with Jewish Communists in order to take over the world. Relying more and more on Fahey for his anti-Semitic radio broadcasts, Coughlin called him "one of the most outstanding scholars of Ireland."

Fahey posited a system in which there was a counterpart to the Mystical Body of Christ with Jesus, the supernatural messiah, as its head. This was a "Body of Organized Naturalism" headed by a natural messiah, who was the Jewish messiah—and who was probably the anti-Christ. Fahey used Aquinas to argue that Satan and the Jews were responsible for every evil of society since they had refused to accept the true Messiah. Now they continued to oppose Christ and his Body at every turn.

Here was the kind of "authority" Coughlin needed to buttress his outbursts, accusations, and scapegoating. These theological trappings made his anti-Semi-

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<sup>1</sup>An unusual set of circumstances made Athans the first person to study Fahey's personal papers and correspondence. These had been stored in the basement of Holy Ghost Missionary College in Dublin after Fahey's death in 1954.

tism all the more persuasive and thus difficult to dislodge among Coughlin's vast audience.

Among the intriguing questions Athans' paper raised is the following. American Catholicism from 1920 to 1940 dwelt upon the thirteenth century as the "greatest of centuries." "Although the relationship is complex, it seems . . . that one of the negative by-products of the Neo-Thomistic revival was that the attitudes toward Jews in medieval times were filtered—if only by a kind of 'osmosis'—into various aspects of contemporary church life and thought." Athans plans further work in this area.

In the second session, a paper on "The Sources of Theology: African-American Catholic Experience in the United States" by Jamie T. Phelps, O.P. (Catholic Theological Union, Chicago) was discussed.

The paper begins by pointing to the three main groups of the two million African-American Catholics in the U.S. One group was formed in the pre-Vatican II church. Their personal and common histories make them generally resistant to the intellectual and practical changes in church life stemming from the Council. Another group stresses their African and African-American heritage and seeks to express this identity in their worship. A third group "struggles to articulate itself as a legitimate and unique form of Catholicism which is both Black and American."

The sources of Black-Catholic theology in the U.S. are the Black experience (history, life, and culture) and Tradition (Scripture and the Roman Catholic dogmatic tradition). The formal beginning of this theology was, however, the First Black Catholic Theological Symposium ten years ago. There Joseph R. Nearon (now deceased) sketched the tasks of Black-Catholic theology as follows: "Black Theology has a two-fold task. It may seek to give a black articulation of the Christian faith. Secondly, it may strive to give a Christian interpretation of the black experience."

At the same time, Black-Catholic theology is developing by pursuing the three major tasks of any liberation theology: critique of dominant theologies, retrieval of Black history and thought, and construction of a distinctive theology.<sup>2</sup> These tasks will be carried out in an interdisciplinary and dialogical fashion. Not only will Black Catholic theologians work with anthropologists, philosophers, historians, etc., but also with pastors, preachers, bishops, and ecclesial communities.<sup>3</sup>

Phelps envisions the criteria of this theology emerging as three-fold. First, is a proposed theological position congruent with what has been taught and believed within the dogmatic tradition (orthodoxy)? Second, does it give rise to action on behalf of justice (orthopraxy)? Third, has it arisen from the passionate appropriation of the Gospel and born fruit in the spiritual transformation of the African-American Catholic community (Toinette Eugene's "orthopathy")?

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<sup>2</sup>Phelps' paper provides a list of African-American Catholic theologians who have recently completed or will shortly complete their doctoral studies.

<sup>3</sup>The work begun at the First Black Catholic Theological Symposium ten years ago is being pursued institutionally by the faculty of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana.

She concludes, "The task is enormous, the laborers are few."

Next year in St. Louis, the continuing seminar on "The American Catholic Experience" plans papers and discussions on two themes, the thought of Orestes Brownson and "The American Catholic Church and the Southern Experience: Is Integration Possible?"

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